

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Remarks at a Saint Patrick's Day Reception

March 17, 2009

The President. Thank you, thank you. Thank you so much. Good evening, everybody.

Audience members. Good evening!

The President. Welcome to St. Patrick's Day at the White House. And it seems particularly fitting that we gather tonight in a house that was, after all, designed and built by an Irish architect.

I want to thank Joe Biden and Jill Biden for being such great friends to Michelle and myself. And Joe is an outstanding Vice President. Jill instructs him on how to be an outstanding Vice President. *[Laughter]* And Joe's mother is just a sweetheart, and so her—you know, we're all thinking of her as she gets back on the mend.

We have had a wonderful day that began by meeting with a strong friend of the United States, *Taoiseach* Brian Cowen, who presented us with gifts of shamrocks from the people of Ireland, a symbol of the enduring ties between our nations, and a reminder of the everlasting promise of spring. And he also brought his wonderful wife Mary, and she has just been extraordinarily gracious. We are grateful to them. I was mentioning in the other room, it turns out that the *Taoiseach* and I have something in common. Both he and my great-great-great grandfather—*[laughter]*—on my mother's side hail from County Offaly. My great-great-great grandfather was a bootmaker there, apparently, and I have been adopted there. I understand that I have been invited to a pub there—*[laughter]*—to enjoy a pint there. *[Laughter]* And so we're going to take them up on that offer at some point.

Audience members. Hey!

President Obama. I also—you can tell these are my friends because they cheered about the pint. *[Laughter]* "Hey!" *[Laughter]*

Just a side note, you know, Guinness tastes very different in Ireland. It is much better. You guys are keeping the good stuff for yourself. It could start a trade dispute. *[Laughter]*

I also had the pleasure of meeting First Minister Peter Robinson and Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness of Northern Ireland, two men who have stood together to chart a historic path towards peace. And they are with us here tonight and deserve an extraordinary round of applause.

I've also met with Sir Hugh Orde, the Chief Constable of Northern Ireland's Police Services, who is leading the efforts to bring those responsible for the recent violence to justice. We've all watched this week as the people of Northern Ireland and their leaders have responded nothing short of heroically to those who would challenge a hard-earned peace, and the thoughts and prayers of Americans go out to the families of the fallen. And I want everyone who is listening to know this: that the United States of America will always stand with those who work towards peace. And after seeing former adversaries mourning and praying and working together, I have never been more confident that this peace will prevail.

Today serves, as well, as a solid reminder of just how deeply intertwined, how deeply woven the ties between our nations are. Irish signatures are on our founding documents; Irish blood has been spilled on our battlefields; Irish sweat went into building our greatest cities.

Tens of millions of Americans now trace their roots back to that little island that has made such a large impact on America, and I include myself in that category.

For generations, the Irish, along with so many other immigrant and ethnic groups, came to America equipped often with nothing more than faith and an unbending belief that success was possible for all who were willing to work hard for it. And that, after all, may be the reason Americans identify so strongly with the story of St. Patrick, the story of believing in the unseen and of making that belief a reality.

And that's what the Irish did in this country. They struggled to create a place for themselves in a distant land. And with a commitment to faith and family and hard work, they transformed that land in the process. And even after all the generations of becoming and being Americans, their descendants have never lost the enduring spirit that insists on proclaiming themselves Irish still. That same pride was embodied by a man who once occupied this very house and whose portrait is right outside this door, a man who was only three generations removed from Ireland.

In the third year of his Presidency, John F. Kennedy decided to make a trip to his ancestral home. And one of his aides advised against it. The aide said, "You've already got all the Irish votes you want in this country." [Laughter] "If you go to Ireland, people will say it's just a pleasure trip." And Kennedy responded, "That's exactly what I want"—[laughter]—"a pleasure trip to Ireland." That's what I want too—[laughter]—but I'm not going to get one right now. We've got a little more work to do. [Laughter]

But while he was there, President Kennedy visited the port from which his great-grandfather embarked for America. And he addressed the Irish Parliament, and he reflected, as we all have from time to time, on the role chance plays over the generations in determining who we become.

And he said, "If this nation had achieved its present political and economic stature a century ago, my great-grandfather might never have left New Ross, and I might, if fortunate, be sitting down there with you," Kennedy said. "Of course, if your own President had never left Brooklyn, he might be standing up here instead of me." [Laughter]

Of course, it bears saying that if Patrick Kennedy hadn't left County Wexford, or if Thomas Fitzgerald hadn't left County Limerick, the American people would have been deprived of the Presidency of John F. Kennedy, but also would have been denied one of the finest public servants of this or any age, and a great friend of mine and many of yours, Sir Edward M. Kennedy.

Teddy wishes he could be here tonight, but I guarantee you this much: The very thought of all of you gathered here would put a twinkle in his eye and a smile on his face. He as much as anyone reminds us of what it means to be Irish: that no matter what hardships may come, there's always joy to be found in this life; that through hard work, tomorrow can be better than today; that comfort is found amidst faith and family, love and laughter, poetry and song.

And tonight, in this room with all of you, I am reminded of the words of that great Irish poet, Yeats: "There are no strangers here, only friends you haven't met yet."

Happy St. Patrick's Day, everybody. I'd like now to bring to the podium, the *Taoiseach* Brian Cowen.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7:56 p.m. in the State Dining Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Catherine Eugenia "Jean" Biden, mother of Vice President Joe Biden. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of Vice President Joe Biden. A tape was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.

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